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ABSTRACT

Infant bilingualism can be defined as a child being exposed to two or more languages from birth. Because of the dearth of first-hand research on the effect of a bilingual environment on a child's speaking patterns, parents from multilingual backgrounds raised their daughter in a bilingual environment, German and Spanish, in England. They speak to her consistently in their respective native languages without any mixing whatsoever: the mother in German, the father in Spanish, and they speak Spanish to each other. At the age of two, when responding to the speaker of one or the other language, the daughter maintains the two languages consistently in vocabulary and grammar, clearly associating each language with a different person, and distinguishing between the languages in reference. Normally, there is no linguistic interference, but in cases where there is, invariably it is clear that she does not know or remember the German or Spanish word needed. It appears that she has acquired the phonological system of both languages in essentially the same way, by about the same age, and to the same standards of achievement as monolingual German and Spanish speaking children. She seems to see a clear distinction in cultural contexts, which has been reinforced by trips abroad. It is hoped that she will acquire English in school to the extent that it will be her dominant language, although all efforts will be made to reinforce her first two languages, German and Spanish. The parents feel that as a child with a multilingual heritage, she will not be harmed, but rather will benefit through acquiring two, or even three, languages at the same time. (MHP)

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BILINGUALISM IN A TWO-YEAR-OLD CHILD *

If we define infant bilingualism as a situation in which the child is exposed to two or more languages from birth, then we may suppose that there are, and there have been in the past, many thousands of infant bilinguals. Yet it is very difficult to find anything written about them from first-hand experience. There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence, parents who talk about the effect that learning two languages at the same time has had on their own or other people's children, and people who quote what parents say. But there is little that can be considered research evidence on such questions as: does the child learn both languages in the same way as monolingual children do; at what age does he begin to distinguish between the different languages; does he acquire just one grammatical system and two vocabulary systems; is he in any way retarded, linguistically or otherwise, during his pre-shool years or when he goes to school; what are the general characteristics of the learning process in a bilingual child; is he able to learn both languages to monolingual standards; do the languages interfere with each other in any way? And many other questions. We should like to make a contribution towards answering the questions just mentioned, a contribution therefore to the anecdotal evidence available as our answers are based on our personal experience and refer mainly to one subject (although illustrations from several other cases are also used).

We should like to explain first of all the background against which we decided to make it possible for our daughter, Cristina, born in April 1976, to learn to speak German and Spanish before she learns English. This background is important because it may seem to some that an exercise in trilingualism is a daring thing to undertake. The point is that we both have personal experiences that,

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suggest to us that, if the circumstances are favourable, a bilingual upbringing probably causes no harm whatsoever.

I (Charlotte Hoffman) was brought up bilingually. I was born in Denmark of a German father and Danish mother. When I was two and had just started to speak (Danish) our family moved to Germany. My mother continued to speak Danish to me but everybody else spoke German. After some time I learnt to speak German and have kept the two languages since - although there was a brief period (when I was about 10) during which I refused to speak Danish to my mother in public while in Germany and only spoke it to my Danish relatives, when in Denmark. I must also say that during my childhood I spent the summers in Denmark, and that when I finished secondary shool in Germany I spent a year in Copenhagen before going to university back in Germany to study languages (English and Spanish). The result is that I am more or less fully bilingual - more or less because I do feel that my German, the language of my education, is stronger than my Danish.

My own experience (Francisco Ariza) is different, as it relates to my own children, not to myself (I was monolingual until I came to this country over 20 years ago). The point is that I have brought up three children to speak Spanish from birth. Indeed, although they have always lived in England they learnt Spanish first as the language of the house was consistently Spanish. At the age of three they started going to a play-group and therefore began to learn English, and when they went to shool they knew English quite well. Spanish continued to be spoken at home, English outside, throughout their childhood.

Notice, then, that all the children we are talking about were consistently spoken to in the same language by the same individuals. Also, in each case the subjects spent considerable time in the linguistic environment of the weaker language (the stronger one being the language of their education in their country of normal residence): Charlotte spent all the summers during her childhood in Denmark, my children went to Spain frequently and, in addition, each of them attended primary school in Spain for one term at the age of 7 or 8; the efect of this, by the way, is that apparently they forgot their English - but after a couple of weeks back at school in England they were again the normal English native speakers they had been before going to Spain. When they go to Spain nowadays (often

for a whole summer) they seem to interact with friends, relatives and everybody else just as so many other native Spanish speakers. One of these children is now in the last year at school, the second one in the 5th Form, and there has been no indication so far that they have suffered in any way from their bilingual upbringing: for instance, no unfavourable comment in this connection has ever been made by their teachers; I can even mention the interesting fact that in the case of the two who have already taken public examinations their highest marks were in English Language.

Against this background, we had to decide, when Cristina was born two years ago, what language or languages she would hear around her. But why bring her up bilingually at all, if we both speak English? Well, one reason is that we both have relatives who do not speak both the languages of the parents, and who do not speak English. We were therefore faced with a choice: either to bring Cristina up as a monolingual speaker which would mean that the possibilities for interaction with some of her relatives would be limited; or to bring her up to speak more than one language. But then, which languages ? We decided against English from birth for two reasons: neither of us is a native English speaker, and we do feel that the child should learn to speak from native speakers; and we live here, so that English will eventually be the strongest language anyway as the language of her formal school education. In our household more than one language is used most of the time, so we decided that we would speak to Cristina each in our own native tongue, and that we would observe her progress as closely as we could. Over the last year and a half we have taken a large number of notes and many hours of recordings, and we intend to continue our observations for as long as possible. One of our main purposes in doing this is to be able to compare the features of Cristina's bilingualism with what we can find that others have observed in monolingual or bilingual children. We have found some interesting pieces of work; for instance, there is a detailed description of the acquisition of Spanish by a monolingual Spanish child (a doctoral thesis, "La adquisición del español por un niño de cero a tres años", by María Fuensanta Hernández, presented at the University of Valencia in 1977), and we have been interested to find, on comparison, that Cristina apparently acquired all the items in the Spanish phonological system by about the same age, and in essentially the same order, as the Spanish child

concerned, and we have the impression that it applies to German as well. The acquisition of the grammatical system shows the same kind of similarities, but of course our observations are not yet complete as Cristina is not quite two and a half years old.

What are the characteristics of Cristina's linguistec environment, and how has she reacted to this environment? As I have said, we always speak to her in German and Spanish respectively; and ever since she was born there have been many other native speakers of these languages (adults and children) around her, at home and abroad. We have a Spanish speaker who lives with us and looks after her while we are at work, and we all make a point of speaking to her as much as possible; we attach a great deal of importance to this. We take very seriously the question of feedback, repeating to her all the time in "normal" language whatever she says to us in her child language. And we take every opportunity to "match" what we say and what we do, and we build on this by asking questions, engaging in verbal play, telling her stories, singing songs and reciting rhymes etc. In other words, we realise that her linguistic environment is limited in terms of the number of people from whom she is learning to speak, and therefore we try to compensate by talking to her and with her a larger proportion of her time. We are lucky, I suppose, that she is not unduly withdrawn or reserved by character, and she seems to enjoy greatly everything to do with talking.

What about the influence of English ? Living in this country, it is inevitable that the child will hear it from all kinds or sources. We do not try to eliminate all instances of English around her - this would be impossible anyway. But we do try to minimise the use of English by us (with visitors) in front of her, as we noticed very soon that she seems to grow restless, after a while, if we talk a language she does not understand; it may of course be simply that she does not like being left on one side. We speak to each other, in her presence, nearly always in Spanish: we use Spanish because, although I understand quite well what Charlotte says to Cristina, Charlotte's Spanish is much better than my German. Many of the people who visit us speak one or other of these languages. At the beginning we were afraid that hearing English around her would confuse her, but in fact this has not happened - probably because actually hardly anyone speaks in English to her. Children learn a language mostly because people talk to them, not around them (the radio etc.), and therefore English is

not a problem - we felt it might be in the sense that coping with three languages in the first three years could be too much for a child.

Our intention is clearly that German and Spanish should be well established by the time Cristina goes to mix regularly with other children, in a playgroup, at the age of three - coinciding with the time when she will be at the stage in her psycho-social development when she will want to take part in associated group play: she will then, we hope, learn English quickly and naturally, from teachers and other children, and she will assign the use of English to the context of the playgroup (and later the school), outside the house, just as she already associates the use of German with her mother and certain other people and the use of Spanish with her father and certain others. We are aware that this kind of consistency is very important as it enables the bilingual child to relate the use of each language to a specific context of people and circumstances.

How has she reacted to using two languages ? She is equally consistent in speaking to each of us in the right language, and she has been so from the very beginning. She may not have been conscious - indeed she can't have been at 18 months - but the fact is that even at this early age her responses were in the language she was spoken to. Nothing extraordinary here, of course. But when she started a conversation she always began in the appropriate language, without a single exception, and she never mixed the two languages when speaking to each of us. (I may mention here that we know several other cases where the parents mix the languages, and the result is that the children often do not learn one of the languages at all well - the one which is not the language of the country of residence; in other cases the children mix the languages all the time, as for example in the case of a little girl the same age as Cristina whom I often see; her mother speaks to her in a mixture of German an English, and the little girl answers with sentences which are a complete mixture: but whereas the mother uses, say, an English sentence followed by a German one, the child uses sentences with words in both languages.) Cristina has clearly always associated each language with a different person. At the age of two she began making remarks that seemed to indicate that she was conscious of the difference between the two languages: she began to mention that Mami, or Papá, said something in different way, or called a certain object by some other

name: Papá sagt mesa, or Mamá dice Tisch. telling one of us what the other calls a table. Quite often it was clear that she was checking what she knew Papá lápiz ? , or simply asking what her father's name for such a thing was. Also at about this age she was able to repeat, to each of us and in our respective language, whatever she (or Paco, or myself) was saying to the other one in the other language. She was doing this unprompted by us, as a natural part of the conversation we were all three having together. What she repeated was never the exact translation of the sentence just used, but the same idea often expressed in quite a different way - normally in telegraphic style, using frequent reduplications and referring to herself in the third person, as corresponds to her age; but it amounted to the same; for instance (examples taken from our recordings):

(1) Father: Anda, vamos a dar un paseo.
Cristina: Mami, Nina raus gehen mit Papá

(2) Mother: Komm, geh'n wir in die Badewanne.
Cristina: Papá, Nina al agua.

(3) Father: Y ahora cierras los ojitos.
Cristina: Mami, Papá Nina Augen zu.

Occasionally, each of us asks the same question of her in succession, and then we get equivalent, but not identical, replies:

Mother: Was machst du ?
(4) Cristina: Sauber sauber. Papá Schuhe ganz 'mutzig.
Father: ¿ Qué estás haciendo, Cristina ?
Cristina: Nina lava Papá zapatos.

Or she may have to try both of us to see if she can get something she wants:

Cristina: Papá, men (ven). Nina ese camelo (caramelo) comer.
Father: No, hija, ahora no.
Cristina: Mami, das Bonbon essen.
Father: Después puedes tomar el caramelo.
Cristina: Mami, Papá das für morgen.
Mother: Hörst du, Papá sagt, der Bonbon ist für später.

The point of this is that she is coping with the language within the limits of what she is capable of comprehending: she is not confusing después and morgen - it's just that she does not distinguish between "later" and "tomorrow". We therefore think that, within the

limitations of what she is able to understand at all, she is aware of two different ways of speaking, what we could in her case call her "mother" language and her "father" language. And we infer that what enables her to keep the two languages separate, what prevents her from mixing them in any way (more about this in a moment) is that the two separate people from whom she is learning to speak never themselves mix them when speaking to her.

Sometimes it is necessary for one of us to ask her to tell the other something and she then reacts always in the same way: she uses the correct language, but a simplified form that nevertheless conveys the message clearly:

(6)
Father: Oye, ¿ Quieres salir conmigo en bicicleta ? Anda, pregúntaselo a mamá.
Cristina: Mami, mit Fahrrad Papá ?

(7)
Mother: Sag Papá mal, daß hier ein Brief von Miguel ist.
Cristina: Papá, esta carta de Miguel.
Father: ¿Tú crees que mamá te deja tomar ahora un caramelo ?

(8)
Cristina: Ein Bonbon !
Mother: Was möchtest du mit dem Bonbon ?
Cristina: Ein Bonbon in Mund 'rein !

As we said before, we established very early on that there are two ways of naming things or saying things. In our conversations when we are all together (for instance, at meal times, or when playing) we say practically everything in the two languages. It must seem to Cristina, therefore, that this is quite natural, and when the occasion requires it she does the same thing without any effort. Sometimes she spontaneously offers an explanation of what she is doing (particularly if she is not quite sure whether she is allowed to do that) in both languages, as on one occasion when she was imitating her motheer drying her hair with the hair-dryer:

(9)
Cristina: (Looking at her mother) Trocken Haar. (waiting for approval; and then:) (Looking at her father) Así Nina seca pelo.

Have we noticed any interferences, that is, the appearance of vocabulary items or constructions belonging to Spanish or German when she is speaking the other language ? The short answer is that in normal circumstances this does not happen. As regards vocabulary, we have noticed very few instances of a Spanish word in the middle of a

German sentence, or the other way round, and invariably it was quite clear that she did not know, or did not remember, the German or Spanish word needed:

(10) Cristina: Mami, Nina male male mit lápiz

When her mother corrected her in the usual way,

(11) Mother: MÖchtest du mit dem Bleistift malen ?

she immediately reacted to the feedback by remarking:

(12) Cristina: Papá sagt lápiz, Mami Blei(s)tift

There are some occasions when she seems to use the conjuction y or the preposition con in Spanish in the middle of a sentence in German, although she uses und and mit frequently in German, as when chanting to herself:

(13) Cristina: Teddy y Puppe y Fahrrad .... etc.

or as in:

(14) Cristina: Nina Auto fahren con Mami, con Papá, con Miguel .... etc.

We do not know whether she loses the sense of distinction between the two languages in cases like these, when she seems to be giving a list, or whether it is because she is talking to herself and not to to one of us, or whether simply there is something special about 'and' and 'with' - Paco certainly remembers that about the only case where his eldest son, Miguel, used to mix English and Spanish in the same sentence was when referring to a television programme that he used to call "Watch con mother" !

It is still very early to say anything with certainty about interference at the grammatical level. Cristina is just beginning to acquire gender, case, verbal tenses and longer sentences. Up to about one or two months ago she was using ese, esa, eso, der, die, ein, eine etc. fairly indiscriminately, and the same could be said for gender and number of nouns, adjectives, endings of verbs etc. But she is becoming much more consistent now. We have observed that her word order is inconsistent in cases, for example, like "daddy's shoes", for which she uses both "Papá Schuhe", as in the sentence "Papá Schuhe 'mutzig", and "Shuhe Papá" as in "Nina Schuhe Papá sauber sauber". And the same in Spanish: we have on record both "bicicleta Papá" and "Papá bicicleta", and many cases of this kind. But this is probably not due to interference, as it happens in monolinguals as well. In any case Spanish has such a free word order that it is difficult to say that something is not correct Spanish in this respect. One does feel that Cristina's

word order tends to change slightly just after she has switched languages, but this is only an impression.

To conclude, and to refer back to the questions mentioned at the beginning: we feel that she has acquired the phonological system of both languages in essentially the same way, and by about the same age, as monolingual Spanish and German speakers, even though we cannot prove this in detail. We have suggested that, for her, "distinguishing between German and Spanish" means a distinction between the way her mother and her father speak, and that she showed that she was aware of this when she was just two years old, and is now (at 29 months) very well aware of it. There is no evidence that she has acquired (or is acquiring) two vocabulary systems and one grammatical system; certainly she knows two terms at least for each items; but as regards grammar it is clear, even at this early stage, that there are two systems and that each is developing separately, with only the slightest amount, if any, of interference regarding word order. The general characteristics that we have observed in her languages acquisition progress have been described briefly: there is a sort of separation of context (in the wide sense) and therefore separation of the two languages; we have tried to reinforce this separation with visits abroad and by ensuring that the people around her speak to her in one language only, and she has responded by being equally consistent. We think that she speaks both languages to monolingual standards at the moment, and this impression has been confirmed by other people with good knowledge of children. The number of words she was using at each stage when we counted them was slightly higher than the average for that age, in both languages. She seems to talk a great deal, and to enjoy talking and play-talking. And she got on very well, linguistically, with the Spanish and German children in whose company she was this summer. Whether she will be able to keep these monolingual standards in the future is a different matter: we know that when she goes to school English will soon become the strongest of the three languages, and we think that this will be a good thing, too: not having a "strongest language" can entail some dangers; for instance, it can be a barrier to normal progress at school. If we want to maintain German and Spanish as languages useful for any purpose during her childhood, the language context will have to be extended beyond the home: frequent stays in Spain and Germany will be necessary to provide her with a "cultural context" and

a wider linguistic experience. Eventually, the degree to which she may become proficient in these languages as an adult will depend to a large extent on the level that she reaches in her general education and on her interest in languages: we all know that having complete control of more than one language means much more than being able to converse fluently in both on everyday matters with members of one's own family and friends. At the moment all we are doing with Cristina is to provide a basis of phonology, grammar and lexis on which there is the possibility of building later; and we are also trying to make it possible for her to talk easily to all the members of our families and therefore be with them here or abroad and relate to them normally. And this is quite enough for us. Being the child of people of different mother tongues is a reality like any other, and such children have to face it in one way or another: we have suggested that, in favourable circumstances, if one makes it possible in such cases for the child to acquire two, or even three, languages at the same time, probably no harm is done and there may be something to be gained.

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